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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IT](#) [ITALIAN](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: ITALY'S REGIONAL ELECTIONS: THE LAUNCH OF THE NATIONAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN

REF: A. FLORENCE 62

[B](#). ROME 1025 (NOTAL)

[C](#). 04 ROME 22

Classified By: A/POL MINCOUNS CANDACE PUTNAM, REASONS 1.4
(B) AND (D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Italians will vote April 3-4 to elect new governments in 14 of Italy's 20 regions. Most polls suggest that PM Berlusconi's center-right coalition will lose in at least two of these regions. These elections are not direct predictors for next spring's national elections for Parliament and Prime Minister, but they will launch intense campaigning for those races. The center-left may make noisy claims about weakening Berlusconi; however, we do not expect the center-right's expected losses to threaten the stability of the longest-running Italian government since the end of World War II. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)2. (U) More than forty million Italians are eligible to vote April 3-4 to elect new governments in 14 of Italy's 20 regions. Some electors will also vote in local races for two provincial ("county") governments (in Viterbo, Lazio and Caserta, Campania) and 368 mayors and city councils. Run-off elections in local races that require a candidate to be elected by 50 percent of the vote will be held April 17-18. (Since 2000, regional presidents are elected directly by voters. The candidate receiving the most votes, even if less than 50 percent, wins.) These elections will be followed on May 8-9 by local elections (provincial and municipal) in Sardinia, one of five autonomous regions that votes on a different schedule from Italy's regions governed by ordinary statute.

[1](#)3. (U) Currently, eight of the 14 regions holding elections are held by the center-right governing coalition. (Of the six regions not voting this year, four are held by the center-left and two by the center-right, giving an even 10-10 split among Italy's 20 regions.) Most information suggests that the center-right will lose at least two of the regions it currently holds, and possibly more. According to national polls published in early March, the two regions considered most likely to swing to the left are Liguria (historically left-leaning, see Milan septel) and Abruzzo.

LAUNCHING, NOT PREDICTING, THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

[1](#)4. (C) The primary significance of the regional balloting is to launch intense campaigning for Italy's national elections, expected in spring 2006. To a large degree, the campaign for those elections has been underway since Romano Prodi was still European Commission President (Ref C), but the regional vote will herald the opening of a more intense phase. Barring an absolute rout for the governing coalition in the regions, Silvio Berlusconi is poised to be the first prime minister in Italy's post-War history to complete a full five-year term. (We will report septel on the factors that will affect the timing of 2006 national elections.)

[1](#)5. (SBU) Regional elections are not a direct predictor for national voting. Voters are motivated by different issues, and indeed in some cases are not motivated much at all to vote in regional/local races. Italians look to national and municipal governments to provide services and implement policies important to them; regional governments (created in the 1970s) do not hold historical resonance for Italian voters.

[1](#)6. (SBU) This holds true even more for center-right voters, who in general are less disciplined party "militants." The average supporter of Prime Minister Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) party, for example, would not dream of participating in a street demonstration, was not inspired by the thought of selecting a European parliamentarian in 2004, and may or may

not vote in a local race. These tendencies hold, if more mildly, for supporters of center-right coalition partners National Alliance (AN, the party of FM/DPM Fini) and the Union of Christian Democrats of the Center (UDC, the party of DPM Follini). The Northern League (Lega, the party of former Minister for Reform Umberto Bossi) is the exception, as a primarily regional party that emerged to address regional/local concerns. Thus, the center-right normally

fares worse in non-national campaigns. It is expected to do so again in these elections.

THE SGRENA/CALIPARI FACTOR

17. (C) The March 4 shooting by U.S. military personnel near Baghdad of Italian security officer Nicola Calipari, who was escorting rescued hostage Giuliana Sgrena for repatriation from Iraq, had the potential to impact regional elections, even though such votes are not normally influenced by international issues. However, we believe this will be a non-issue in the campaign because of public perception that PM Berlusconi stood up to the United States for Italy's interests and successfully pressed for a joint investigation. We do not see it as a factor in the elections, although the PM himself may have secured some political boost from his handling of the matter. (Ref B)

CENTER-RIGHT BRACES FOR A SETBACK --
BUT BERLUSCONI WILL STILL BE HERE

18. (C) The center-right majority is bracing for setbacks in regional voting. The PM on March 3 declared his intention to stay out of regional campaigning, thereby distancing his popularity from the expected negative results. Berlusconi has now agreed to stand with Fini and Follini at the side of the center-right (AN) candidate for the Lazio (Rome's region) presidency, Francesco Storace, during his closing April 1 rally. The about-face indicates the seriousness with which the majority views signs of movement away from the center-right, exacerbated by a decision by Italy's highest administrative justice body, the Council of State, to allow the tiny far-right Social Alternative (SA) party of Alessandra Mussolini (granddaughter of Benito Mussolini) to run in Lazio. SA had been barred by Lazio's Regional Administrative Tribunal for collecting fraudulent signatures to support its participation. With that decision overturned, even a small percentage of right votes going to Mussolini's party could jeopardize Storace's campaign. The center-right wants to avoid the loss of this key (and previously considered fairly safe) region.

COMMENT

19. (C) The center-left can be expected to trumpet each and every win as a mandate for Romano Prodi and his coalition in next year's national elections. In fact, we do not see the regional vote as predictive of national results. These elections certainly will launch intense campaigning for the 2006 contests. Barring an unlikely rout, however, we do not expect the loss of a few regional elections to threaten the stability of the Berlusconi government.

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